DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 368 CG 014 091

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TITLE Similarity in Locus of Control and Marital Satisfaction in College Students.
INSTITUTION New Mexico State Univ., Las Cruces.
SPONS AGENCY New Mexico State Univ., Las Cruces. Bureau of Educational Research.
PUB DATE [78]
GRANT 1-3-44854
NOTE 21p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adults; College Students; *Friendship; *Individual Characteristics; *Interpersonal Attraction; Interpersonal Relationship; *Locus of Control; *Marriage; Married Students; Perception
IDENTIFIERS *Marital Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

The locus of control among married couples was compared to that among their friends. Also compared was the relationship between married couples' locus of control and their reported marital satisfaction. No correlation was found between friends' locus of control, whereas a positive correlation was found between married couples' locus of control. The similarity of locus of control and marital satisfaction was negligible for the newlyweds; it became progressively more positive as years of marriage increased. (Author)

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MAY 2 5 1978

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Similarity in Locus of Control and Marital Satisfaction in College Students

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CG 014091

Running head: I-E and Marital Satisfaction

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Similarity in Locus of Control and Marital Satisfaction in College Students

A. Introduction

The preponderance of research findings points to the strong correlation between similarity and interpersonal attraction, at least among strangers and incipient friends[5], which prompted many to call it the fundamental law of social attraction. The existence of a causal relationship between similarity and attraction was also suggested by a field study which found that similarity prior to acquaintance was associated with attraction after acquaintance[17] and laboratory findings that experimentally manipulated similarity in attitude could lead to different levels of attraction[5]. On the other hand, the effect of similarity on long-term, naturally occurring relationships such as marriage is less clear. On some dimensions, such as race, age, social status, and IQ, married couples were found to be more similar than strangers[15, 21, 22]. However, when it comes to the similarity of personalities or attitudes of the married couples, results were rather modest and often inconsistent[7, 10, 16].

Although it is reasonable to assume that couples were probably attracted to each other enough to get married in the first place, it would seem presumptuous to assume that all married couples are still attracted to and have liking for each other. Some studies tried to differentiate between happy, unhappy, and divorced couples in dimensions where they were similar or dissimilar, as possible clues for marital compatibility. Once again, the investigation on this issue in the past forty years has indicated nothing more than a modest trend[10, 25]. Several studies found insignificant relations between couples' similarity in various dimensions and their

marital happiness, although some found that marital harmony was positively correlated to attitude similarity in religion[21] and that unstable couples tended to be different on four traits (warm-hearted, enthusiastic, self-opinioned, and self-sufficient), whereas stably married couples' personalities tended to be similar[6].

The inconsistent effects of similarity in long-term, real-life relationships point out the danger of oversimplyfying the complex nature of interpersonal attraction and the lack of in-depth analysis of "similarity". As Duck[11] asked: "similarity of what? when?" Some kinds of similarity are more important than others[2, 5], and even if the issue is important, not every individual will be personally involved and interested[8]. Similarity also may not always lead to attraction, especially when personality traits have social desirability value. Studies have shown that everybody, including introverts, tended to like more extroverted people[14]; everyone tended to avoid people with neurotic tendencies, even other neurotics[2] and even selfish and immature people preferred cooperative, kind, and tolerant others[1]. All of these findings suggested that the effect of similarity on attraction is mediated indirectly through its reinforcement value.

The stages of interpersonal relationships may also interact with different dimensions of personality or attitude similarity: As a relationship progresses, different aspects of similarity may become more influential to the attractiveness of the interaction. Duck and Spence[12] demonstrated convincingly that literal similarity (using the same words)

was the most appropriate measure in incipient friendships, and conceptual similarity (using the same concepts but not necessarily the same words) became more valuable in studying firmly established friendships.

Laboratory-manipulated study of short-term interpersonal interactions differs from the naturally occurring interactions in more than one way. It takes time to know others well, and in the real world people do not really have other people's complete personality profiles or attitude inventories at hand to decide who is going to be liked. It is conceivable that during the initial stage of interaction in the real world, because of their limited contact and knowledge of each other, similarity on certain relevant, concrete, and salient issues brings people together. However, in long-term relationships similarity on central, global, and abstract constructs may become progressively more important in shaping the relationship. Constructs that deal with individuals' hypotheses of the world and their subjective interpretation of the events are central conceptual components of the person's way of life. Such central constructs with their subjective and ambiguous nature may be most appropriate for validity testing of the person's social reality. As Byrne[5] suggested, if consensual validation of attitudes underlies attraction, the similarity of those constructs should relate positively to the attractiveness of the relationship. However, the present study hypothesized that this positive relationship between similarity of central constructs and attraction would only be significant for long-term relationships, such as marriage, in which married couples deal with their similarities and differences in various ambiguous and complex aspects of daily living.

Locus of control deals with a person's perception of the relationship between one's behavior and its consequences, and the person's attribution of the reinforcement in life to either one's own effort or to outside, uncontrollable factors[24]. A perceived lack of control will lower a person's expectation of having effective interaction with his environment either in a specific or in a general way, and therefore affects the person's behavior in those situations accordingly. Locus of control has been found to be a central personality variable, significantly related to motivation and achievement[9], adjustment to anxiety and threat[18], national suicide rate[4], adjustment to aging[19], and person's stance on controversial social issues, such as energy conservation[3] and the Warren Commission report[13]. The present study used locus of control, as measured by the Rotter I-E Scale, as a general, global, and central construct to test the hypothesis that such a construct would have its impact only on long-term relationships, such as marriage. Specifically, it was hypothesized that similarity on the locus of control scale would be related to the compatibility of the relationship only for the marital relationship; it would not relate to attraction for the short-term, incipient friendships.

B. Method

1. Instruments

Rotter's I-E Scale with 29 items was given to all subjects in the present study. The scores range from 0 to 23, with higher scores corresponding to a more external orientation. A Marital Relationship Survey was constructed which contains both measures of demographic information such as

the subject's present age, length of marriage, number of children, and also ten items assessing the marital relationship on a five-point scale with a score of five representing the highest similarity or compatibility, and a score of one representing the lowest. These ten items deal with general marital satisfaction as well as with the specific relationship on dimensions such as the couple's openness and frequency of communication, compatibility in disciplining children, opinion on money and purchases, recreation and use of spare time, selection of friends and socializing pattern, sexual satisfaction, and division and sharing of family responsibilities.* In a pilot study, through a confidential interview with the couples after the survey, the interviewer found the answers reported in the Marital Relationship Survey were generally reliable, and related strongly to the couple's verbal expression of marital satisfaction, as well as the interviewer's subjective evaluation of the marital relationship. However, no cross validation has been conducted to study the correlation between the present form and other instruments such as Nye-McDougal's Marital Adjustment Survey, the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test, etc. Further validation of the present Marital Relationship Survey is needed.

2. Procedure

The pilot study of the present investigation utilized 21 married couples who volunteered for a confidential marital relationship study at Lake Superior State College in Michigan, where either one or both members of the couples was enrolled in undergraduate studies. The group as a whole appeared to have few noticeable marital problems, and participated in the study under

*Marital Relationship Survey is available upon request.

the appeal for self-knowledge and improvement. Each couple took the Rotter I-E Scale prior to the Marital Relationship Survey. After the tests were scored, an informal interview was conducted with each couple to discuss their marital relationship, related problems and possible strategies. The mean ages of husbands and wives were 29.21 and 27.50, respectively; the mean length of marriage was 5.62 years.

The major investigation was conducted at New Mexico State University. Announcements of the study were made at various undergraduate education and psychology classes in the University, and those who gave consent to participate were included in the study. Fifty-three married couples with either one or both members enrolled in undergraduate studies took the Rotter I-E Scale, prior to the Marital Relationship Survey. The mean ages of husbands and wives were 30.28 and 28.57, respectively; and their mean length of marriage was 7.11 years.

Another sample of New Mexico State University undergraduate students was taken from a senior education class during the seventh week of instruction. The members did not know each other well prior to this class attendance. However, because of the small class size (N = 22) and the emphasis on class interaction, the members had become fairly well known to each other at the time when this study took place. Those 22 students took the Rotter I-E Scale first, and then were asked to select a friend whom the subject liked the most, first from the same sex classmates, then from the opposite sex classmates, which resulted in two nominations per subject. The mean age for

this sample was 27.51. Complete confidentiality was kept for all the participants' identities and their responses to the instruments.

C. Results

1. Friendship Pairs

Each subject nominated a most-liked same, and a most-liked opposite sex classmate, which resulted in a total of 44 friendship nominations. Thirty-two of these were mutual nominations, which resulted in 16 non-redundant reciprocal pairs. Twelve nominations were non-reciprocal, where the most-liked friend nominated somebody else as the most-liked, and resulted in 12 non-reciprocal pairs. Within the reciprocal and the non-reciprocal groups, a product moment correlation was constructed to assess the correlations between the pairs on their I-E scores. The correlations between reciprocal pairs ($r = 0.05$, $N = 16$, $p > 0.05$) and between non-reciprocal pairs ($r = 0.11$, $N = 12$, $p > 0.05$) were both insignificant. The mean I-E score for those 22 students in friendship pairs was 9.47.

2. Married Couples

The mean I-E score of the 21 couples from the Michigan pilot study was 9.26. The majority of the couples either had no children (62%) or had one or two children (28%). The mean marital satisfaction scores for husbands and wives based on the Marital Relationship Survey was 3.37 and 3.52, respectively.

The mean I-E score of the 53 couples from New Mexico was 8.92. The majority either had no children (64%), or had one or two children (26%). The mean marital satisfaction scores for husbands and wives based on the Marital Relationship Survey was 3.80 and 3.84, respectively.

The responses of the 53 couples at New Mexico State University to the ten items in the Marital Relationship Survey were analyzed through factor analysis. Only one single factor emerged which had an Eigen value of 4.96, and was able to account for all the variances. This single factor was designated as marital satisfaction. The mean of the husband's and the wife's marital satisfaction scores was used as an indicator for their mutual marital satisfaction.

A product moment correlation matrix was calculated on husband's and wife's I-E scores; husband's, wife's and their mutual satisfaction scores present ages, length of marriage, and number of children. Significant correlations were obtained between husband's and wife's ages (r = 0.95, N = 53, $p < 0.01$), between husband's and wife's marital satisfaction scores (r = 0.83, N = 53, $p < 0.01$), and between husband's and wife's I-E scores (r = 0.31, N = 53, $p < 0.05$). Significant and negative correlations were found between the couple's mutual marital satisfaction and number of children (r = -0.38, N = 53, $p < 0.01$), and the couple's mutual marital satisfaction and length of marriage (r = -0.27, N = 53, $p < 0.05$). No significant correlation was found between the husband's I-E score and his, his wife's, nor their mutual marital satisfaction scores (r = -0.16, -0.12, -0.15, N = 53, all $p > 0.05$). Similarly, no significant correlation was found between the wife's I-E score and her, her husband's, nor their mutual marital satisfaction scores (r = -0.10, -0.13, -0.12, N = 53, all $p > 0.05$). All other correlations were insignificant.

According to the length of their marriage, those 53 couples in the New Mexico study were divided into three groups: newlywed (< 2 years, N = 19),

early marriage (3-5 years, $N = 15$), and long-term marriage ($>$ 5 years, $N = 19$). Analyses of variances based on three marital stages were performed on marital satisfaction. A significant difference in marital satisfaction was found between different stages of marriage for New Mexico couples ($F = 5.17$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$); the newlyweds reported a significantly higher level of marital satisfaction than the other two groups ($<$ 2 years, $\bar{X} = 4.27$; 3-5 years, $\bar{X} = 3.60$; $>$ 5 years, $\bar{X} = 3.59$; Least Significant Difference test at 0.05 level). Similarly, those 21 couples from the Michigan pilot study were divided into three groups: newlywed ($N = 5$), early marriage ($N = 8$) and long-term marriage ($N = 8$). A significant difference in marital satisfaction was found between different stages of marriage for Michigan couples ($F = 4.10$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.05$); the newlyweds reported a significantly higher amount of marital satisfaction ($\bar{X} = 4.29$) than those who had long-term marriages ($\bar{X} = 2.82$); whereas the early marriage group ($\bar{X} = 3.55$) did not differ from the other groups (Least Significant Difference test at 0.05 level).

I-E similarity between each couple was obtained by taking the negative value of the difference between the husband's and wife's I-E scores. Product moment correlations between marital satisfaction and couple's I-E similarity were performed for all the New Mexico couples as well as for those in each of the three marital stages. I-E similarity was significantly correlated with reported marital satisfaction for those who had been married for more than five years and the total sample, but not for the other two groups (see Table 1). Similar analyses were performed on the data from the

Michigan study, and the results are also reported in Table 1. Second order partial correlations between New Mexican husband's and wife's I-E scores, and between their marital satisfaction and I-E similarity, after partialing out the ages of both husbands and wives, were similar to the product moment correlations, and are also included in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Among New Mexican couples, those who had children reported significantly less amount of marital satisfaction ($\bar{X}$ = 3.53, N = 19) than those who had no children ($\bar{X}$ = 4.01, N = 34; t = 2.16, df = 51, $p < 0.05$). Comparing the correlations between I-E similarity and marital satisfaction at three marital stages (see Table 1) at 0.05 significance level, it was found that among New Mexico couples, the newlywed group had a significantly lower correlation than those who had a long-term marriage, whereas the early marriage group did not differ from the other groups. Among Michigan couples, the newlywed group had a significantly higher and negative correlation as compared to the early marriage group and the long-term marriage group which did not differ. A comparison of correlations between husband's and wife's I-E scores at three marital stages (see Table 1) at 0.05 significance level revealed that: Among New Mexican couples, the three groups did not differ significantly; among Michigan couples, the newlywed group had a significantly higher and negative correlation than the early marriage group which in turn had a significantly lower correlation than the long-term marriage group.

D. Discussion

The similarity in internal-external orientation, as measured by Rotter I-E Scale, seemed to be a dimension that is irrelevant to interpersonal attraction among incipient friends, as both reciprocal and non-reciprocal friendship pairs have negligible correlations. Among married couples, the correlation between husband's and wife's I-E scores was somewhat higher. The most interesting finding was that the similarity of the couple's locus of control became progressively more aligned with their reported marital satisfaction as the length of marriage increased in both New Mexico and Michigan couples, although the orientation of locus of control per se did not relate to marital happiness in any significant way. Evidently, at the casual friendship level, people were attracted to each other because of a variety of reasons, probably the least of which is their similarity on some vague and abstract outlook of life. Married couples, as compared to incipient friends, tended to have had a longer time for interaction, and a deeper understanding of each other. The present investigation found a moderate and positive correlation between New Mexico State University married couple's locus of control, that was fairly stable over the stages of marriage, which suggested that marital partners might have selected each other, at least partially, based on the similarity of their locus of control. On the other hand, the results with Michigan couples in the pilot study, although admittedly small in sample size and limited in its interpretation, pointed out the possibility of couple's attraction through complementary

opposite orientations at the beginning of the marriage, with the married couples becoming gradually more similar to each other in their locus of control as they share living experiences together.

During the first two years of marriage, the attraction between most couples is high and many rewards help to enhance the feeling of satisfaction such as physical attraction, newly gained companionship and status of marriage, to name a few. The similarity or difference in some general orientation probably would not have much weight in most people's marital satisfaction at this stage. After being married for a significant period of time, when the initial excitement of the marriage has been diluted by the boredom of the daily routine and the inevitable conflicts of two different people living together, the factors which were important in the initial stage of marriage might become gradually less influential in contributing to the continuing happiness. At the same time, a compatible perception of the social reality, and similar approach to problems which many times do not readily lend to any possible solution, might become progressively more significant in facilitating the feeling of marital satisfaction. The hypothesis that similarity of locus of control would relate to the compatibility and satisfaction of a long-term relationship, but not necessarily relate to the short-term relationship was supported by the results, at least among college students like those employed in the current study.

The present study also found a significantly higher amount of reported marital satisfaction among the newlyweds; those who had been married for more than five years reported the least marital satisfaction. The ages of

the husband and the wife were highly correlated, as well as the marital satisfaction reported by the husband and the wife. The number of children related significantly and negatively to reported marital happiness, as found by some studies[20, 23], but not others[26] which reported that large families with many children and those without children were both likely to experience more family disruption. For college undergraduates as employed in the present study, children became a burden for the tight budget, and competitors for the precious studying time, and conceivably those who had children reported less amount of marital happiness as compared to those who had no children.

The present study is based on college married students, and the ability to generalize the present results to the general population is limited. Contrary to many studies which tend to show that internal orientation was aligned with "healthier" traits such as achievement motivation and problem solving ability, the present study showed that, except for a trend toward negative correlation, the orientation of locus of control did not relate to marital happiness significantly, rather it was the similarity of locus of control which related progressively more strongly to marital satisfaction as marriage matured. Furthermore, the present study pointed out the possibility that the relationship between interpersonal attraction and similarity is not straight forward and that it is mediated through many other significant factors, such as dimensions of similarity and depth of the relationship. Interpersonal relationships in the real situation cannot always be replicated and simulated in the laboratory; one of the crucial ingredients that is

missing in the laboratory is the time element. It takes time to know others, and to develop a relationship in the real world. As a relationship develops, different aspects of similarity might become important during different stages. Further studies with a larger and diverse population to test this hypothesis are needed.

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Footnotes

1. Request for reprints should be addressed to the senior author: Lily Chu, Educational Research Center, Box 3R, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico 88003.

2. The present study was supported by the Educational Research Center Mini-grant: 1-3-44854, 1977-78.

Table 1

Reported marital satisfaction, correlations between husband's and wife's I-E scores, and between couple's I-E similarity and their marital satisfaction at three marital stages

(Partial correlations are in parentheses)

Length of marriage (years in closest whole number)	Number of subjects		Reported marital satisfaction		Correlation between husband's and wife's I-E scores		Correlation between I-E similarity and marital satisfaction	
	NM	MI	NM	MI	NM	MI	NM	MI
< 2	19	5	4.27	4.29	0.30 (0.33)	-0.47	0.09 (0.05)	-0.90*
3-5	15	8	3.60	3.55	0.21 (0.20)	0.15	0.26 (0.33)	0.55
> 5	19	8	3.59	2.82	0.37 (0.45*)	0.75*	0.55** (0.52**)	0.80**
all	53	21	3.83	3.45	0.31* (0.32*)	0.48*	0.30* (0.27*)	0.28

* significant at 0.05 level
** significant at 0.01 level